



# Towards a Theology Relating to Mission

March 2010

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*God is the author of mission, Jesus Christ embodies the content of mission, the Spirit is the enabler of mission, the Church is an agent of mission, and the world is the arena of mission.*



*God's mission is the coming "reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation".*

*- Basis of Union par.3*

*"It is not the church of God that has a mission but the mission of God that has a church".*

*- Archbishop Rowan Williams.*

## The Mission of God

**1.** "Mission" means basically a sending forth. It describes purpose. Although widely used in many settings it is fundamentally a Christian word. As God sent Jesus Christ into the world, so the church, the body of Christ, is sent into the world to continue Christ's mission (John 20:21).

**2.** Mission is not simply an extra activity to the life of the church to be added to faithful worship and passionate service for example. God the Creator has a purpose for creation and engages with creation to move it towards its intended end. The whole church and not only parts of it are called to participate with God in this all encompassing mission process. It involves nothing less than the reconciliation and renewal of people and the whole creation. Because of this all inclusive nature of mission it is not possible to define mission in any formula. It also means that the different aspects of mission are necessarily interrelated. In dealing with separate categories in what follows for the sake of clear discussion, it is not implied that they are discrete in reality.

**3.** David Bosch says, "Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the triune God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world (Transforming Mission, p.392). All of God's actions relate to mission. God is the initiator, director and sustainer of mission. The triune God is a God of mission in that God is in God's self a community of inter-relationships and sends the Son and the Spirit into the world to engage in God's missional purposes. God creates, honours what is created and continually reaches towards creation in love. Mission has its origin in the heart of God who chose to create the world and humanity and has intentions for them all.

**4.** God freely created and in freedom made a covenant with creation, to cherish and sustain it and lead it towards its designed end. Creation has the capacity to turn against humankind if human beings fail to respect nature and disregard the covenant. Nevertheless, God continually comes toward humankind wanting a relationship. God called Abraham in order that through him all nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Israel was a chosen people not just for their sake but that they might be a light to the nations (Isaiah 60:3). God has acted in human history especially through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In taking human form in Jesus Christ God hallowed life. God through Jesus and the Spirit seeks to reshape human life that humanity might become as God intended and contribute to God's missional purposes for all creation.

**5.** Jesus Christ as the image of the invisible God gives clear form to God's mission. The nature of God's reconciling and renewing mission is seen in Jesus' words and actions. Near the commencement of his public ministry Jesus went to his home town of Nazareth where he made use of a passage from the prophet Isaiah to describe his mission (Luke 4:16-20). It involved being anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

**6.** In Jesus we see God at work inaugurating God's reign of love and justice, peace and reconciliation. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15), and enacted it in word, deed and sign. He healed the sick, set possessed people free, taught God's ways, deliberately related to all kinds of people, challenged the powers, and acted symbolically. In Jesus' passion and death we see the extent of God's love for humanity. His death was redemptive for through it the power of sin and death were defeated. By the resurrection we know that God was indeed in Jesus Christ and has raised him to be the living Lord.

**7.** Through the leading and enabling of the Holy Spirit the ministry and mission of Christ continues and develops especially through the church as those who explicitly seek to follow Jesus' way. The Spirit is at work in the world and enables the truth of Jesus to be known (John 16:13-14). The church and also other agents are called to participate in God's mission. God through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit is active in the world creating, honouring, judging, overturning and transforming it towards God's intended ends.

## Humankind and God's mission

**8.** Humanity is both an object and an agent of God's mission. God is concerned for the whole creation, both humankind and "otherkind" as Douglas John Hall puts it. Human beings and their various cultural expressions are created and enabled by God to live and develop. People are called and empowered to be part of the mission of God. That mission includes caring for and being stewards of God's creation. People invite judgment on themselves when they dishonour God and God's purposes, when they abuse creation, and when they neglect or take advantage of others. Nevertheless, God can turn from judgment and people from ways that lead to death and destruction towards enabling them to have life, justice and peace. As embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God demonstrates a persistent love of creation and humanity, redeeming and renewing it, despite the terrible misuse of human freedom.

**9.** In freedom God created humanity and honours the freedom given to human beings. Humans therefore have the capacity to develop patterns of thought and action that are both life-giving and life-denying. Though made in the image of God with all the potential that implies, humans are also capable of sinfully misusing their freedom and the power God has enabled them to have and expand. Because of our broken relation with God humans have a bias towards sin. God has given humankind awesome power so people have the responsibility to practice care for one another, the earth and all living creatures.

**10.** Human societies develop patterns of living that can become so entrenched that

they develop their own spirit, with power over people and society. Walter Wink calls them “the powers that be”. Positive patterns can foster justice, reconciliation and peace. Negative ones can lead to oppression, division and enmity. God blesses those powers that enhance life and opposes powers that diminish or destroy it. From a feminist and Asian perspective Kwok Pui-Lan says, “Mission is to proclaim the good news that God affirms life over death and that God acts among the poor, the majority of whom are women who are victimized in the globalization of the market economy and left out in decision-making processes”.

**11.** The Holy Spirit is the enabler of mission and guides people into participating in that mission of God exemplified by Jesus Christ. By turning towards Christ people can experience healing and liberation and the invitation to be intentionally part of what God is doing in the world. They are also called into the community of those who acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ. The church is meant to be a prime agent of mission consciously seeking to align itself with God’s purposes.

**12.** The Spirit, however, uses people and organisations of all kinds, whether they acknowledge Jesus Christ or not (Isaiah 45:1 identifies Cyrus as an agent of God’s purposes). Nevertheless, an indication of whether people and organisations are part of God’s mission can be seen by the spirit and outcome of their actions. If they accord with the life and teaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus they can be assessed positively. If not, if they can be self serving and life denying, living by other spirits than the Holy Spirit. There is the need to test whether the spirit and actions of people and organisations are from God.

**13.** The church, as people called to be disciples of Jesus Christ, has continually to discern the Spirit. Collectively and individually the Christian community is to witness to and be faithful to Jesus Christ in word and deed. Otherwise it can fall far short of God’s intention that it be a fundamental means of God’s mission in the world.

## The Goal of Mission

**14.** The goal of mission is that the whole creation be reconciled and transformed. It is the realisation of the coming reign of God that Jesus announced. God’s kingdom is “already” coming into reality but is also “not yet”. Its fullness awaits the future. Bosch points out, “The vision of God’s ultimate reign of justice and peace serves as a powerful magnet – not because the present is empty, but precisely because God’s future has already invaded it” (p.517). Participation in this new creation, this realm of God, inaugurated by Jesus Christ focuses Christian activity. We are called to connect with what God is doing, what Jesus initiated in the world. It thereby relativises shorter term measures of effectiveness. It values creaturely existence while putting it in the context of God’s ultimate purposes. It also broadens the scope of Christian and especially church interest. God wants the whole creation to reflect God’s intention. God is concerned for the world, not just individuals and the church, which are invited to be involved in God’s wholistic mission. We can further affirm that God is not only concerned for people and planet Earth but indeed for the whole created cosmos.

**15.** God is bringing in a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21) which is the final

outcome of the mission of God. This world will be transformed into the new creation. This encompassing new reality has broken into this world decisively in Jesus Christ. God's reign has been inaugurated. God draws us into that new creation as we participate in the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ. New creation comes as a gift from God (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are invited into it. Humankind cannot themselves build or bring God's fulfilled kingdom, although God uses worthy action undertaken in grateful response to God's initiative.

**16.** This new creation, or realm, or commonwealth of God contrasts with the empires of this world. "Empire" names the destructive and unhealthy dynamics of the world. Empire is self interested approaches to life that take more from the earth than it was created to give, that arrogate power to themselves which should be God's alone, and undermine the cherishing of people and nature. People are invited to disbelieve and turn from the empire's ways and become citizens of the kingdom of God, thus subverting imperial systems. Not "Caesar" but Jesus alone is recognised as Lord.

**17.** The citizenship of that commonwealth, the reign of God, is marked in baptism. Baptism celebrates dying to sin and being raised to new life in Christ in the fellowship of the church. The Basis of Union says baptism "initiates people into Christ's life and mission in the world" (BU par.7). Through baptism people symbolically pass from being part of one realm to another. They turn from the rule of the empire renouncing evil and its power and turn to God through Christ and in the Spirit. The Lord's Supper nourishes God's pilgrim people on their way towards the promised end. Through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, they have communion with Christ, "are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world, and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which Christ will bring to consummation" (BU par.8).

## The Church and Mission

**18.** The Church is brought into existence by God and is called to serve God's mission. It neither creates itself nor its mission but is to recognize its dependence on God's Spirit for its life and purpose. It is to be "a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself" (BU par 3). In order to do so it needs constantly to reconsider its purpose. It is to resist the sinful tendency to divide the world into an inside and outside instead of seeing all in relation to God's activity. The God who is with us, is with us in all life in the world. The church needs to recognize the distinctive source and identity of its life which is in the triune God to whom it continually points. Bosch says, "The church has to remain identifiably different from the world, else it will cease to be able to minister to it" (p.388).

**19.** The Church is provisional and imperfect and always in the process of being formed towards maturity and "the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). The church is true to its purpose only as it joins in the continuing ministry and mission of Jesus Christ. Daniel Migliore says, "All Christians are to participate in God's ministry of liberation and reconciliation through Jesus Christ" (Faith Seeking Understanding, p.226). Every member of the church is to confess the faith of Christ crucified and risen and be his faithful servant. The

Basis of Union says, “It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ’s Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ” (BU par.13). The Uniting Church promises “to provide for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows on them, and will order its life in response to God’s call to enter more fully into mission” (BU par.13).

**20.** As an instrument of mission, the church exists to bless people and creation and bear witness to Jesus Christ and God’s rule. As a sign and foretaste it is to seek to embody the reign of God in its communal life. While it continually comes short and fails in this, it can but trust in God’s forgiveness and in the power of God to provide new life. The Basis of Union says Christ calls people to be his disciples and “in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his church” (BU par.4)

**21.** Living the new life requires discerning what is of God and what is not. This discernment happens primarily as the “disciple community”, as Hall calls the church, listens for the Word of God, gathers around the Lord’s Table, opens itself to the truth of God in prayer, connects with daily living, and disperses to participate further in the mission of God. Communities of faith gather in many ways and in different locations and go out to be representatives of Christ in the world.

**22.** The gathered and sent Christian community is central to God’s mission to the world. It seeks intentionally to know and do God’s will. The discernment process should be integral to the institutional mission activity of the church in its various forms. These activities need to have a connection with the communities of faith that meet week by week. The sharp distinctiveness and the focussed loyalty to God proclaimed in the Word, marked in baptism and celebrated in the Lord’s Supper, is meant to shape all the church does including its different serving agencies. They should convey that they live by a different spirit, namely Christ’s Spirit.

## Forms of Mission

**23.** Mission encompasses a range of activities. These include such elements as the church being with and for others, mediating salvation, evangelism, concern for justice and peace and the environment, common witness including witness to people of other living faiths, liberation, and action in hope (see Bosch ch.12). In what follows a few areas of particular importance and relevance are focused on recognising that they are interrelated and represent only part of the fullness of mission. God invites people to use their God given gifts and talents in discipleship and mission. In doing so they will find that such service brings freedom, satisfaction and meaning to life. The Christian paradox is that in losing one’s life for the sake of Christ and the gospel one finds it (Mark 8:35).

**24.** The church’s worship is both a component of and a stimulus to mission. Our mission to the world is grounded in our relationship with God. Worship is the vertical dimension of mission through praise and appreciating the reality of the divine rule and the promise of the new creation. In worship we gather to honour God, listen for God’s Word, pray for others and ourselves, and receive the gift of the Spirit for our life and mission. We

respond to God's grace in gratitude by acknowledging the sovereignty of God and God's claim on our lives. We celebrate the presence of the risen Christ and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in God's mission in the world. We are sent out in peace to love and serve the Lord.

**25.** By living authentically as people of God, the Christian community points to God's reign, embodies joyful living, practices compassion, and undermines destructive and life denying powers. The church reminds itself of the presence and truth of the risen Christ who is present and active through the witness of scripture, the guidance of the Spirit, and in God's call to live distinctly in the world as Christ's ambassadors.

**26.** In faithful work, relationships, family life, rest and play, people witness to and participate in the mission of Jesus Christ in their home, community, workplace and recreation. These are venues for the people of God to give expression to their particular identity. They contribute to society's wellbeing by being distinctively Christ's disciples who love God and their neighbours and cherish creation.

**27.** The scope of God's mission is the whole of creation, so world mission is necessarily fundamental to mission. All churches should have not only local and regional mission but also world mission as a vital component of their corporate life. The Basis of Union affirms "that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries, and to this end the Uniting Church commits itself to seek special relationships with Churches in Asia and the Pacific" (BU par.2).

**28.** One important aspect of mission is evangelism in which the church invites people to consider Jesus and his message of the reign of God and provides opportunities to respond and become consciously part of God's people and mission in the world. The risen Jesus commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them (Matt. 28:16-20, also Mark 16:15, Luke 24:46-48). The Basis of Union says the churches coming into union "hear anew the commission of the Risen Lord to make disciples of all nations" (BU par.1). Evangelism involves witnessing in the power of the Spirit to the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed. It recognises that the grace and truth of Jesus Christ is greater than any particular person's presentation. It invites people to discover for themselves the truth of Jesus and the message of the reign of God he proclaimed.

**29.** Evangelism contrasts with proselytism which is the attempt by people to impose on others their faith perspective. In responsible evangelism there is sensitivity and respect for the other. Nevertheless, the gospel is also subversive and challenges other positions including our own preconceived ideas. The ground for the meeting is the opening of both partners in the conversation to God's reality and purposes. Christians witness to Jesus Christ as the one they hold to be the image of God, the conclusive revelation of God. In evangelism Christians unashamedly point to Jesus as their Saviour and Lord and request others to consider him (Romans 1:16). It invites people to see Jesus as the one who most clearly revealed God and God's reign which is already at work in the world and towards which the whole creation is moving.

**30.** We need to remember that it is the Spirit who is the agent of evangelism, of conviction and conversion. God draws people to Jesus (John 6:44), though the witness of those who follow Jesus as God's Son is important (Acts 1:8). Witness to people of other living faiths and persuasions means also being willing to learn from them including discovering more of the truth disclosed in Jesus Christ in the encounter.

**31.** Prophetic witness is another aspect of mission. In it the church points to God's desire for the reconciliation and transformation of the world. God promises genuine newness for people and the world. The prophetic word addresses the self orientation and excesses of much contemporary living offering fresh perspectives and new life which come from God. This prophetic witness challenges the church also as it seeks to engage the world with God's message of judgment and hope. Amos' words to Israel continue to apply to God's people if their worship does not correspond with doing God's will. Speaking for God he said, "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies....But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:21-24).

**32.** God's reconciliation already won in Jesus Christ is the ground for justice and peace. For Jesus reconciled the world to God and called for individuals and communities to live under the reign of God. The church's worship proclaims, receives and enacts that reconciliation in Jesus Christ. Prophetic witness calls for this reconciliation to become a reality in and through the church and in the world. God's desire is for justice and righteousness to be practiced, for fair and honest dealings in public life to be carried out, for the rights of those with no power to be respected, for compassion for the poor and needy to be shown, for care for the environment. There is no real peace without justice. Wherever there is brokenness, violence, racism and injustice the people of God are called to be involved in peacemaking and work for justice (Matthew 5:9-10).

**33.** Compassion is a basic component of mission. In caring for people, especially suffering and disadvantaged people, the church ministers to the immediate needs and hurts of people. It follows the teaching and example of Jesus. The church engages in welfare in various ways but is also called to challenge those structures and systems that create or perpetuate brokenness and distortion in communal life. People, including those who do not name Christ, respond to God's call through acts of compassion and advocacy, through service in the caring ministries of the church. The church and Christian people also practice compassion for people through cooperation with agencies and organisations committed to similar values and ends. This is all part of God's mission.

## Conclusion

**34.** God calls the church to participate in God's mission of creation, reconciliation, healing, preservation and transformation. It is to be a sign and instrument of the coming reign of God. The church looks to the day when this earth will be transformed into the new creation when pain and death will be no more (Revelation 21:1-4), and when all will recognise who the risen Jesus is, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God (Phil.2: 9-11).

# Study Guide

## Background information

This paper on a theology of mission was prepared at the request of the Assembly Standing Committee. A draft was written and was a background paper for the combined Colloquium on mission and evangelism held between the Doctrine Working group and the Mission and Evangelism Network. At that Colloquium held on 23-24 November, 2009 several other people were invited including the National Directors of UnitingWorld, UnitingCare, Frontier Services and the convener of the Reference Group on Relations with Other Faiths. Following the Colloquium some people in particular were asked to comment on the paper in order to strengthen it. The Doctrine Working Group also commented on it.

The paper is offered to the church as a discussion paper in order to encourage people's thinking across the UCA concerning mission. It is not intended to be a fully comprehensive statement. It does invite people to see mission in the broad way outlined as true to the theological heritage of the Uniting Church.

This paper on mission was received by the Assembly Standing Committee at its meeting on 19-21 March 2010. Promoting mission is one of the roles of the Assembly (Basis of Union par15(e)). The minute of the March ASC reads as follows:

It was resolved to:

Receive the paper "Towards a Theology Relating to Mission"; and

Distribute the paper to synods and presbyteries and encourage them to use it as a basis for a discussion on mission in the church especially locally (10.18.01-02).

## Possible process

The paper Towards a Theology Relating to Mission could be used by synods and presbyteries as a discussion paper for one of their meetings. People could discuss mission in table groups using the paper as the basic resource. The intention is to assist people to come to a deeper understanding of mission and connect it to their context. As well as table group discussion, there could be some reporting back to the whole group of things that stood out for their group, though this would need to be kept to a limited timeframe.

Therefore people are invited to read the paper and then discuss it in sections in small groups as indicated above. The questions below are given to facilitate that discussion. These questions can be selectively used or others developed according to the context and time available for the discussion.

It would be helpful if presbyteries also provided the paper to ministry agents suggesting that church councils discuss it in the way suggested.

## Questions for Discussion

What do you think of the quote from the Basis of Union concerning God's mission?  
What is the point that Rowan Williams is emphasising in the quote from him?

### **The Mission of God – paragraphs 1-7**

Why is mission not one activity of the church among others? What was Jesus' mission?  
What is your understanding of the reign of God he inaugurated?

### **Humankind and God's mission – paragraphs 8-13**

How do you understand humans as being made in the image of God yet sinful? How can  
"the powers" be both negative and positive? Can you think of any examples?

### **The Goal of Mission – paragraphs 14-17**

What do you regard is the goal of mission?  
What is your response to the use of the term "empire" to describe powers that are op-  
posed to God's purposes? In our context what might they refer to?

### **The Church and Mission – paragraphs 18-22**

How do you interpret the quote from Bosch about the church needing to be different from  
the world in order to minister to it? Why is it necessary for the church to be both a gath-  
ered and a sent community?

### **Forms of Mission – paragraphs 23-33**

How can worship be both a component of and a stimulus to mission? What do you think  
is involved in living authentically as God's people (25-26)? Why is world mission a fun-  
damental component of mission? What are some of the ways to be involved in world  
mission? How do you respond to the paragraphs on evangelism (28-30)? What issues  
do they raise for you? Why is prophetic witness important (31-32)? How does the Uniting  
Church engage in this?

### **Conclusion – paragraph 34**

How is your congregation/agency seeking to be a sign and instrument of the coming reign  
of God?

At the end of the discussion time it would be appropriate to give people the opportunity in  
the group to make any summarising comments on the discussion, such as new insights or  
directions, and then to conclude with a time of prayer.